GROWING UP A NISEI IN CALIFORNIA

First of all, I want to thank you for being here this evening, and I feel honored to be addressing you. And I shall be telling you how I grew up in a multi-ethnic community in central California, what it meant to grow up in a bicultural, bilingual family. The term "multi-ethnic" is an interesting one, and I have often thought how appropriate it is, since this country, as you well know, has often been called "the melting pot." Perhaps, we should note at the same time that not all the differences have been melted down, that we each somehow retain something of our ancestry that makes us what we are, whether in physical features, with food likes and dislikes, ways of doing things, even in our feelings towards the world and its people around us.

In my reading, since I am a librarian by calling, I looked for a good definition of the word "race," since I would be describing racial, or ethnic differences in my upbringing. Stanley M. Garn in his book Human Races explained it very well. So let me share it with you. He states: "Human groupings of various kinds have been designated by the term race. Race has been equated with language, and that is the sole meaning of the 'Aryan race.' Race has been identified with religion, as in the case of 'Jewish race,' which in reality comprises a number of discrete populations some quite unrelated to each other. National groupings have frequently been called races, especially in periods of intensive nationalism. While at times linguistic groupings and biological races may coincide and while religions or even national Boundaries may delimit race-populations of various sizes, language, religion, and national affinity are hardly measures of race. Race is a biological concept and races are biological units. Races, moreover, are natural units and not artificial assemblages created by selecting 'types' out of a population."

Garn also points out that non-biological uses of the term race by politicians and others, as well as obvious popular misuses, as in speaking of the "human race," have occasioned word substitutes. One such is "ethnic group," which properly means a culturally defined group, and this phrase he does not consider an exact semantic equivalent replacement.

So I considered this definition seriously, and came to the conclusion that both terms might apply to me, since I could be described as being of Mongolian origin by "race,"and I had a cultural background that derived from its own peculiar ethnic roots. Consequently, in the light of these distinctions, let me describe my upbringing in a Japanese community in California, the customs that we observed in our family, the traditions that were handed down to us, and our relationships to other people in the community. But before I continue, perhaps I should explain that my family may have differed somewhat from the other Japanese families I knew in Sacramento, California, where I spent my childhood.

Historically, the Pacific Coast drew towards its shores Asiatic immigrants, as the Atlantic coast received immigrants from Europe, and the Japanese formed one of the last, and the smallest, of our immigrant groups. The first Japanese immigrants to this country were recruited by American employers to replenish the supply of reliable, energetic labor on the farms, railroads, the mines and canneries, which began to dwindle with passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Nine out of ten of the early immigrants were unmarried men from the farm areas of southern Japan. After settling here, they sent for wives from Japan and started their families. The children were known as the Nisei, the second generation. I am a Nisei, and my parents were the Issei, the first generation. As the Japanese immigrants established

What was it like to have been raised in a family like ours, with the cultural background of my parents, in this country where standards of child rearing are more indulgent and less rigid? Well, at times, it was downright tough! It meant growing as American by schooling and associations, but also conforming to the customs and traditions that our parents considered proper. I have a feeling that Mother practiced her teaching discipline on us. I recall an essay that one of my brothers wrote about her, when he was in high school, and he described her warm endearing qualities, but he ended his composition with the sentence, "But she is a hard woman!"

It might interest you to know that my sisters and I were given Japanese names by Mother, Toyo, Hisa, Mae and Masa, but Father named my brothers William, Roy, Howard, Joe and Lee. In fact, Father was so interested in American history that he named our twin brothers, who died when babies, Benjamin and Franklin. And my youngest brother was named after another Historical personage whom Father admired, Robert E. Lee. According to custom, although I was the oldest, my brother Bill, a year younger than I, was always considered the chonan, the eldest son and heir.

Japanese families are vertical in structure, with the father at the head of the family in his position of control and authority, and the traditional Japanese family is characterized a strong sense of kinship and solidarity. In ours, we paid deference to Father, but we secretly felt that Mother was more than his alter ego. Our parents emphasized loyalty to the country, to one another, respect for age, hard work, duty, moral obligation and responsibility for our own actions.

We learned to behave in the home and outside, and behavior was constantly rewarded, punished, reinforced and reshaped by parental techniques, one of which was based on ethnic identity. We would be told, "The Japanese boys don't cry," or "The Japanese do it correctly this way" or "Good Japanese don't even think about things like that!" But my gentle courteous mother must have often despaired about teaching us ideal behavior and manners, because she would refer to us sometimes rather wryly as yabanjin, barbarians. I should add that she had a tremendous sense of humor.

Growing up in a family like ours was also learning to make ourselves understood in two languages. Mother spoke Japanese to us, but actually she understood far more of our English and current slang than she would admit. Father spoke English to us because it was more convenient for him, and if we had anything vital to relay to Mother, he would act as interpreter.

When we were children, we observed many holidays, both American and Japanese, and we looked forward to them with great excitement. On March 3rd, Dolls' Festival Day, Mother would make a step arrangement on the library table in Father's study, with her Japanese dolls at the top and our everyday dolls on the bottom. She would let us invite our little girl friends in the afternoon, and they would come with their dolls dressed in new clothes, and she would serve us tea and special confectionery. On May 5th, Boys' Festival Day, Father would fly five large paper carp from a bamboo pole high up in the cherry tree in the

backyard, one for each of his sons. The carp, to the japanese, represented courage and perseverance in the face of difficulties as the fish fought upstream to spawn. Christmas was the most meaningful to us, with a lovely, sparkly tree and pageant at church, and next New Year's Day, which we celebrated according to Japanese tradition. Others we found enjoyable were the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day.

When the older of us children reached college age, my family moved to Berkeley to attend the University of California, because years before my father had gone to the same university to major in mining engineering. Many Issei parents felt that education would enable their children to be free of the intolerance and discrimination that they had to face.

But prejudice did not vanish. As the American-born generation graduated from the universities and colleges, they found it almost impossible to obtain the jobs for which they were qualified. So engineers worked as auto mechanics, and my father had to work as a life insurance agent. Girls with doctorate degrees had to take jobs as housemaids. Graduate chemists and physicists worked in their fathers' fruit stores. And so before the war, the Japanese on the West coast, like the rest of the world, lived and worked in their accustomed places, in professions, industry, services, and on farms. These were the Japanese, not one type, not even one homogeneous cultural pattern, because of the differences between the older and younger generations, but simply men and women, and their children, large and small, fat and thin; the healthy and the sickly; the good and the bad; of different layers of society, of all degrees of American and Japanese traits.

Then World War II brought changes into the lives of many peoples around the earth. One small aspect of this change was the evacuation of the Japanese from the Pacific coast. And this is what I want to describe for you, as I lived through its phases. That time seems long ago, but not as remote as it may seem to you.

So now let me take you back in time. At 7:55 a.m., Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, the United States Naval Station, Pearl Harbor, on the island of Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, was attacked by Japanese aircraft. At that hour, I was giving my little son, not quite three months old, his morning feeding. As I heard that grim radio broadcast, I was stunned. My immediate thought was how would we Japanese living in this country be affected. I learned. By nightfall, the Japanese on the West coast began to feel the effects. All Japanese funds were frozen. Because of prohibitions against trading with the enemy, tradesmen lumped us citizens with the foe overseas. Grocers refused to sell us food; milk companies ceased to deliver to Japanese families. I foudn that I could not buy anything at the corner grocery store where I had been going for months. Wholesalers stopped supplying Japanese merchants.

In the panicky weeks after Pearl Harbor, feeling against the Japanese ran high. A superpatriot chopped down four cherry trees along the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. The Tennessee State Department of Purchasing declared "open season on Japs, no license required." And an elderly Japanese man and his wife were shot to death in their bed in El Centro, California. And my brother Roy enlisted in the United States Army.

Immediately with the beginning of the war, the Department of Justice through the Federal Bureau of Investigation had arrested registered enemy agents and persons known to have hostile intentions. Then followed repeated investigations and arrests whereever there were grounds for suspicion.

On December 11, 1941, the Western Defense Command was established, and the entire West coast was declared a theater of war, with General J.L. DeWitt designated as military commander. The public temper became spiteful, and by the end of January, 1942, the commentators and newspaper columnists, professional "patriots", witch hunters, varied groups and persons began infkaming public opinion. We were already under curfew, and had to in our homes by eight p.m. We were finding it difficult to shop or market for our large family.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order no. 9066, authorizing the War Department to set up military areas and exclude any or all persons from these areas. The next day this responsibility was delegated to General DeWitt. In the cities, a mounting number of aliens were being drawn into the FBI net, many on the slightest accusation. With the signing of the exclusion order, we knew we would be forced out of our homes.

No one knew, however, when we would be evacuated. Everyone was tense, not knowing what to do, how to make preparations and when. But by a series of 108 separate orders, DeWitt ordred all Japanese removed from the military areas, which included all of the states of Washington, Oregon, California, and a portion of Arizona. By June 5, 1942, all the Japanese were cleared from the coastal area. The explanation given at that time was that of military necessity, the decision for the order resting with DeWitt, even though by February 14, 1942, he knew that no acts of sabotage had been committed. No Japanese-American, either in Hawaii or on the mainland, has ever been convicted of either sabotage or espionage. De Witt's decision involved a judgment on soiological rgounds, and racial considerations were evidently regarded as part of the military necessity, requiring mass evacuation. So it was that what was later called "our worst wartime mistake" happened.

On March 2, 1942, the first evacuation areas were named, and on March 10, the Wartime Civilian Control Administration was established to assist in the evacuation. Since no preparation had been made for so huge a mass exodus, fairgrounds and race tracks were used as temporary shelters, and there were eighteen of these. Army engineers went immediately to construct primitive barracks in these centers to house 100,000 people.

With others lving around the San Francisco bay region, my family was sent from Berkeley to the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno, south of San Francisco. The evaucation itself was handled on an area basis, as one district after another was designated for exclusion. On the day appointed for leaving, all the Japanese within the area, citizens and aliens alike, reported at a specified place. In Berkely the larger families were moved out first, and we learned of this the day before we had to leave, from a phone call from my brother Bill who was teaching bacteriology at the University of California. Since we we were permitted to take only what we could carry ourselves, which meant about two pieces of luggage per person, Mother organized us into work-squads, assembling clothes to take,

discarding and repacking what we had to abandon. Fortunately, our large book collection had already been packed and stored with a Caucasian friend. I called the Salvation Army and the Goodwill Industries that the basement door would be left unlocked and that they could call for clean clothing, household equipment and furniture the next day. That day blurs in sequence, but I recall that I had to go uptown to get the required identification tags for each member of the family and our luggage, shop for baby necessities, stopping by a friend's home to say goodbye, and rushing back to wash clothes. Through most of the night, Bill kept a bonfire going in the backyard to burn accumulations of old letters, school school papers, things that we could not take with us, or leave behind. It was not until we started discarding cherished possessions that we realized fully that we were being moved out - away from our home, from friends, from familiar surroundings.

The morning of our departure from Berkeley, a sunny April morning, we had to gather at a church, surrounded by military sentries standing guard with drawn bayonets. We were then taken by chartered Greyhound buses, under military guard, from Berkeley to Tanforan. At the intake station under the grandstand at the race track, the men were search from head to feet for contraband, and my father had his pocket-knife confiscated. Our family, now to be known by the family number of 13423, and not by our surname, was assigned to horse-stalls in one corner of the race track. Because of the size of our family, we we were assigned to two horse-stalls.

The assembly center was far from being completed when we arrived. Carpenters were still building in the center field of the race track. Additional wash-rooms, shower rooms, and laundry buildings were constructed. We had no furniture, except the army cots, so we "salvaged" scrap lumber, and Father made stools and a table. None of the stools were of the same height but served their purpose.

At first, until the assembly center was filled, the families ate in the common dining room, which was the ground (actual dirt) floor of the immense grandstand. This was the messhall for the 8000 evacuees in our assembly center. At mealtimes, there would be two lines blocks long, waiting to be served. After the first meal, we soon learned to take along tissue papper to wipe our plates clean before receiving our food. Eventually the camp was segmented into areas, and more mess-halls were built to provide for each area. More food supplies came in, as the camp became more settled.

Even here in the assembly center curfew was imposed, and roll call was held every day at 6:45 a.m. and 6:45 p.m. Each barracks had a house captain who made the rounds to check on us. Day and night Caucasian camp police walked their beats within the center, on the lookout for contraband. Civil liberties were at a minimum. The entire camp was closely guarded, surrounded by watch towers manned by armed sentries, and searchlights played around the camp at night. We were introduced to, and trained in, communal living from the beginning of our internment. Since the partitions between the rooms did not reach all the way to the ceiling, a comment spoken in an ordinary tone of voice would carry the entire length of the barracks. Private conversation, not intended for the neighborly audience, had to be whispered against the ear. To those of us accustomed to walking but a few steps from the bedroom to the bathroom, the

bathroom situation posed a problem. Now we had a distance of half a block to the nearest latrine, in all kinds of weather. Here at Tanforan, and later at Topaz, Utah, there was no running water piped to the barracks.

Churches were established early to bolster the morale of the distressed and humiliated people. There were Protestant, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic and Buddhist groups. Another help to morale was the opportunity to work, and those who were physically able worked for the monthly wages ranging from eight dollars a month for the unskilled; twelve dollars for the skilled, and sixteen for the professionals. In addition, a clothing allowance of $3.75 per month was issued to each worker and his dependents, with the allowance scaled down for the children.

Schools were eventually established for the adults and children, and volunteer evacuee teachers were employed. These volunteer teachers were recent graduates of the universities in the bay area, and they taught their major subjects to the high school students. The curriculum was based on the core curriculum of the California school system. I taught English.

Rumors began to seep through the center in August that the evacuees would be moved to a more permanent camp - a relocation center in Utah. Ten relocation centers were built from California to Arkansas, and managed under a new civilian agency, the War Relocation Suthority, commonly known as the WRA. Bulletins began to appear throughout the assembly center on how to prepare for the moving, but no one knew till September when the relocation process would start. Again there were the stir and unrest of preparations, the packing and crating. Two days before departure everything had to be tagged, inspected and ready for pickup.

The first group that left from our assembly center for Utah was the advance work group of 214 people, all volunteers, to make way for the induction of those to follow. Among them was my brother Bill, a bacteriologist, on the sanitary engineering crew.

The Utah relocation center was situated on the "Plains of Abraham". where Mormons had tried farming and failed. It took three days of travel by train from California to reach this southwest part of Utah. The Utah center began to fill as one contingent after another were shipped out of the assembly center. The volunteers who had gone ahead worked at the receiving stations, interviewing, registering, housing, and explaining to travel-weary newcomers what they must do and where they must go. The new arrivals, coming in a steady stream, were poured into the empty blocks, as into a row of bottles. The reception procedure became known as the "intake", and it left a lasting impression on all who witnessed it.

My family, with the exception of Bill, arrived at the Central Relocation Center on October 3, 1942, and Bill was there at the intake gate waiting for us. A small band of Boy Scouts was there also, tooting and blaring out in the dust and heat their version of "Hail, hail, the gang's all here." Though we had grown accustomed to the sight of barracks in Tanforan, the sight of the new camp was a bleak, desolate scene, where hundreds of low, black tar-papered barracks were lined up in rows through each block.

The Utah camp was only two-thirds finished at the time we arrived. The entire camp area occupied 17,500 acres. The center contained 42 city blocks, of which 36 comprised residential sections, and the camp was one mile square. All residential blocks looked alike, and people would get lost all the time. Each block consisted of 14 barracks, made to standard Army measurements, 24 feet wide and 96 feet long, partitioned into rooms, with the smallest rooms at the ends of a barracks, to accommodate a couple, and the larger rooms in the middle for larger family units. Our family was again permitted to have two rooms, but in order to go from one room to the other, one had to go outside and then into the other room. Mother soon tired of this inconvenience whenever she needed to speak to any of my brothers, so she had Father cut out an entrance in the intervening wall and hung a curtain there.

The population of Topaz, christened the "Jewel of the Desert" by the residents, numbered approximately 10,000, with most of the people from the San Francisco bay area. Since Topaz was 4,650 feet above sea level, the winters tended to be very cold and long, as the snows began early in autumn and ended late in spring. Dust stroms were always prevalent, and a stiff wind could stir up a blinding dust storm which could blot out the adjacent barracks and turn a room with all its content a gritty gray.

An "indefinite leave" program was started by which the evacuees, after proper clearance by the government and assurance of a job "outside", could leave the camp and settle in a city of their choice. Also, by 1943, the Army had decided to recruit a Japanese-American combat team. The volunteers from Hawaii and out of the internment camps formed the much-decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team. In our own camp, there was a number of Bronze Star and Purple Heart mothers.

By the end of 1944, the Supreme Court ruled that citizens whose loyalty was certain could not be held in camps, and the Army rescinded the exclusion order.

So the camps began to close down, and we were once more seeing friends off at the departure gate. As residents left and the blocks became depleted, mess halss were consolidated, and I found myself walking several blocks away for meals. Most of my family had relocated to Cincinnati by the time Topaz closed, but Father, Mother, Lee, my son and I remained until the end of October, 1945. How often in those weeks, at night,as I looked at darkened windows in the next barracks, I would think of the overwhelming events that had brought us to this place, of people I would never see again and wonder what lay ahead in time for us. When we were first interned at Tanforan, my son had been five or six months old, and now as we were about to leave camp, he was past his fourth birthday. He had never seen a concrete building, or even a regular house, a city street, a lawn, a park, a bush in bloom, people with other faces and coloring, and so I saw through his eyes, the fresh sight of a wondering child, the outside world from a new perspective and accepted the release as he did.